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CIA threatens to review scientific research

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Threats by the Central Intelligence Agency that would require American scientists to submit their research for review could "destroy the foundations of science," said two Virginia Tech scientists.

At a recent session of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Admiral Bobby Inman, deputy director of the CIA, said that laws would be enacted to enforce scientists to submit their work.

In his speech, Inman said there is an overlap between technical information and national security which produces tension.

"This tension results from scientists' desire for unconstrained research and publication," Inman said, "on the one hand, and the federal government's need to protect certain information from potential foreign adversaries, who might use information against this country."

However, several Tech scientists have expressed concern over CIA intervention and the effects that censorship would have on the realm of science in this country.

University distinguished professor of physics, Robert Marshak, said, "The question lies with the American science community and whether we are willing to cooperate with censorship."

"The idea of the CIA coming in and trying to monitor research projects," Marshak said, "would be terribly counterproductive. We would lose more than we would gain."

John Cairns, professor of biology and director of the Center for Environmental Studies, said that censorship of any kind would destroy the openness between scientists and subsequently hinder the advancement of science.

"The basic issue as I see it," Cairns said, "is that people may misunderstand the nature of science. If I get an idea and I publish it in a journal and it is wrong and people see it, they can respond by publishing that Cairns was wrong for these reasons. I may find myself that I was wrong in the peer review process."

"The academic process assumes that there will be a certain amount of error in everything that is new. Error is corrected by the system, by peer review process. The whole community judges who is right or wrong. It is a self-correcting system that depends on opportunity for people to point out errors. If you make things secret, you cut out that self-correcting process."

"There is some harm done," he said, "by keeping

things secret and not allowing the process to occur for science as a whole."

Inman was not available, and his assistant would not comment on any statements Inman made at the conference. Kathy Pherson, of the CIA public affairs office, said the concerns expressed at the session were not strictly based in the CIA but rather were enveloped by the entire United States government.

"We are pointing out a problem in the U.S.," Ms. Pherson said.

In his speech, Inman said that a balance between research and national security is essential. Inman, who worked with cryptology scientists when he was head of the National Security Agency, is recommending a system of review similar to the one used in the NSA. He called it a safeguard for society in his speech.

Marshak and Cairns insist that the costs will outweigh the benefits.

"If Inman makes threats," Marshak said, "it is going to be a mess. Scientists won't stand for it. It is an unpatriotic act, trying to push that compulsion on our society."

Marshak, who has had some of his research suppressed during periods of war, said the benefit of openness between scientists makes the United States research the best in the world. "Our advances in technology depends on the progress of science."

Cairns, who studies pollution and toxic chemicals, said more harm is done by keeping things secret and not allowing the process to occur for science as a whole.

"It is a long process. It may take 10 years before an idea is generally accepted. In all that time, people are reading what you've done and repeating it in their laboratories. Suppression of criticism is more dangerous than letting other people get ideas from you."

"One of the chief joys of the academic community is finding mistakes in other people's work — not maliciously or anything, but it is part of the game. I can then quickly correct my research. If I go on in ignorance, because no one has had a chance to criticize me, it could cause problems. The biggest drawback of censorship is cutting out this process of peer review."

Cairns said that reviews may take up to six months. "I have papers in review now that have taken that long. It should not have to take that long, but it does. Imagine what would happen if you added another layer of review like this. It would at least double the time. That is the worst aspect."